

# Freshman Year: The Make-it or Break-it Year

You are about to start the most important year of high school—perhaps the most important year of school so far. This is the year that will set the stage for whether you will graduate and whether you will be ready for college.

How do we know this? Because researchers at the University of Chicago—the Consortium on Chicago School Research—have spent years trying to understand what really matters when it comes to graduating from Chicago Public Schools. Working in cooperation with the district, the Consortium researchers have analyzed years of data—surveys, standardized tests, student grades, attendance records—and uncovered some connections that might surprise you.

It's not about your 8<sup>th</sup> grade test scores, or even the ACT test that you will face in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, although these tests do matter. It's not about where you live and how much money your family earns, although those facts get a lot of attention when educators talk about drop-out statistics.

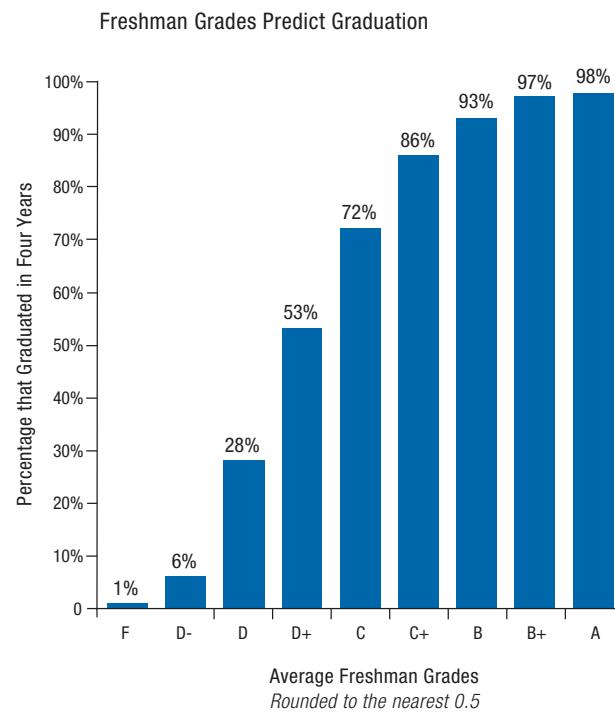


## Here's what really matters far more than anything: **GRADES AND ATTENDANCE**.

No one wants to be a drop-out statistic. So as you begin this crucial year, consider what research tells us about Chicago freshmen and the factors that influence whether or not they will graduate four years later.

### GRADES

- More than 95 percent of students with a B average or better in their freshman year graduate.
- Freshmen who earn a B average or better have an 80-percent chance of finishing high school with at least a 3.0 GPA.
- Freshmen with less than a C average are more likely to drop out than graduate.

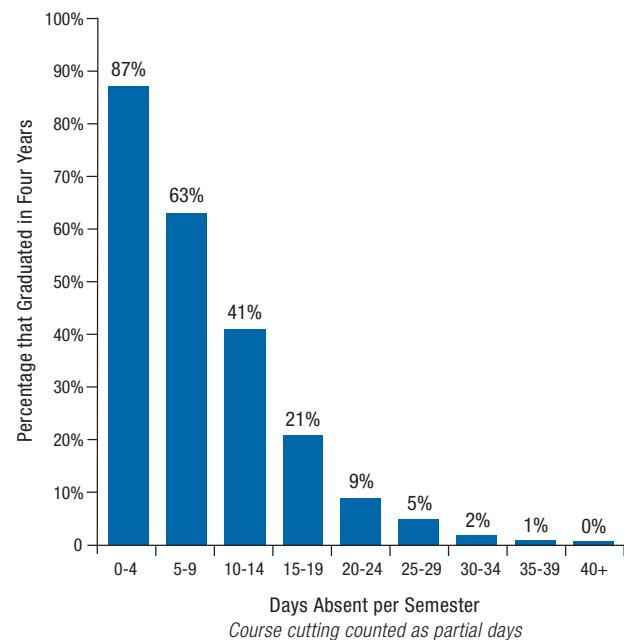


## Grades and Attendance

## ABSENCES

- Nearly 90 percent of freshmen who miss less than a week of school per semester graduate, regardless of their 8th grade test scores.
- Freshmen who miss more than two weeks of school flunk, on average, at least two classes—no matter whether they arrive at high school with top test scores or below-average scores. In fact, freshmen who arrive with high test scores but miss two weeks of school per semester are more likely to fail a course than freshmen with low test scores who miss just one week.

Missing Classes Puts Graduation at Risk



## What does all this research mean for students?

Essentially, that the freshman year is an important chance for a fresh start. Strong students can quickly fall off course if they start cutting classes and blowing off homework. And students who struggled in elementary school can turn things around if they come to school every day and aim for a B average. For Chicago students who want to graduate from college—and 78 percent of seniors say they do—that B average in high school is what it's going to take to succeed in college.

It sounds simple, but there is a lot of room for improvement in these two areas. That's because:

- **More than half of Chicago freshmen fail a course.**
- **About 40 percent miss more than a month of school in that first year (which includes class cutting).**
- **The average GPA is lower than a “C.”**

But you don't have to be one of these statistics.



## So...what can you do?

✓ **Get to school on time and don't cut classes.** You may think it doesn't matter to blow off your first or last class of the day, but it does. Even occasional skipping leads to dramatically lower grades. And it sends the wrong message to teachers about your desire to succeed.

✓ **Ask your teachers for help.** Teachers should be helping struggling students, but sometimes it falls on you to ask for help. We know from our research that students do better in their courses when they trust their teachers and count on them for support.

✓ **Make academics your top priority.** This means trying hard on assignments even when they aren't interesting and choosing to study instead of socializing when there is a big test. Students with good study habits have higher GPAs and fail fewer courses than classmates who don't make homework a priority.